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ABSTRACT

A six-year-long study investigated the reading instructional strategies used by elementary school teachers and identified those strategies used by effective and less effective teachers. At two-year intervals, all third and sixth grade teachers who taught reading in self-contained classrooms were classified as high, average, or low effective teachers. Effectiveness was determined by comparing students' predicted end of year reading achievement with their actual performance. The 64 teachers in the study also completed questionnaires that elicited information about their instructional practices, including skill sequencing, diagnostic record keeping, group organization and instruction, and materials used. The results showed that effective teachers at both grade levels used fewer reading groups than did less effective teachers, and the more effective teachers relied upon commercial skill charts connected directly with a basal reader series, while less effective teachers relied more heavily on teacher prepared charts. All teachers in the study kept diagnostic records, but the more effective teachers placed more emphasis on basal reader diagnostic level tests and less effective teachers on teacher made tests. All teachers used flexible grouping procedures; however, effective teachers used progress as the criterion for changing students from one group to another while less effective teachers used lack of progress as the criterion. Effective teachers relied heavily on basal readers, while less effective teachers did not. (FL)

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Identification of Reading Instructional Practices Employed by Elementary Teachers

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Identification of Reading Instructional Practices

Employed by Elementary Teachers

Hundreds of results of reading investigations are reported yearly in professional journals and at professional conferences. In addition to reading investigations, expert opinion about reading instruction and the reading process can be found in journals, textbooks, and heard at educational conferences. A large portion of this research and expert opinion either applies directly to classroom reading instruction or addresses theoretical concepts intended to provide a better understanding of the reading process. One of the major areas of reading inquiry that should have a direct effect on improving the quality of reading instruction in the public schools is the teacher effectiveness in reading instruction research.

It is logical to assume that research results about effective teaching of reading could result in improving the quality of classroom reading instruction. The accumulated knowledge about effective teaching of reading is at a point where it can begin to serve as a basis for describing many of the instructional process variables

associated with pupils' reading achievement (Anderson, Everston, and Brophy, 1979; Heilman, Blair, and Rupley, 1981; McDonald and Elias, 1976; Rosenshine, 1976; Rupley and Blair, 1981). Recent research efforts (Anderson, Everston, and Brophy, 1979; Stallings, Needles, and Stayrook, 1979) have demonstrated that teachers trained to use teaching strategies associated with effective reading teachers obtain greater pupil achievement gains in reading than do untrained teachers. It is also apparent in the early reading research literature that much of what is claimed as new and insightful today were primary areas of investigation during the turn of the century. For example, features of recent effective reading instruction inquiry such as allocated time for instruction, opportunity to learn, time on task and content covered were also investigated in the 1920s and 1930s (Ford, 1924; Gates, 1936; Gray, 1933; Reinoehl, 1922; Woody, 1923). Many of the recommendations based on the findings of this early research parallel closely those that are offered currently as means for improving the quality of reading instruction. Why is it, then, that teachers of reading are not characterized as relying predominantly on the use of such effective strategies in their reading instruction?

There are several explanations for the lack of implementation of effective reading instruction inquiry results. One credible explanation is the limited attention given to whether or not classroom teachers perceive a need for changing their reading curriculum and instruction. If the cumulative results of teacher effectiveness research are to significantly impact reading instruction, increased attention needs to be given to describing existing reading instruction, specifying what needs to be modified, and ascertaining how

best to communicate promising research findings to classroom teachers.

The major purpose of the present study was to describe selected reading instructional strategies and procedures used by elementary school teachers. Primary focus of the study was on reported teaching behaviors and procedures used in the teachers' reading instructional programs. These data could then be compared with recommendations found in the reading teacher effectiveness literature. A secondary purpose was to compare identified instructional strategies and procedures used by the teacher in relation to their level of success status over a six year period.

METHOD

Subjects

Over a period of six years, at two year intervals, all third and sixth grade teachers who taught reading in self-contained classrooms in a large midwestern school district were identified as high, average, or low effective teachers of reading. Teacher's success status was determined by comparing pupils' end of year reading achievement with their predicted end of year reading achievement. Least squares prediction procedures, utilizing the standard error of estimate, were used to identify teachers success status stability for each of the two year intervals. Teachers were then categorized by their stability of effectiveness. That is, high effective teachers were those who for each of the two year intervals produced greater than predicted pupil achievement. Identical procedures were used to identify teachers for average and less effective success categories.

Eleven third grade teachers were randomly selected from each of

the three success status stability categories for a total sample of 33 teachers. Due to attrition, all sixth grade teachers were included in the sample, resulting in eight high, fourteen average, and nine low effective teachers.

Data Collection

Teachers in the sample were administered a questionnaire designed to gather information about their classroom reading instruction. Major categories in the questionnaire were skill sequencing, record keeping, group organization, group instruction, and material usage. Teachers responded to questionnaire items by either selecting a description, writing an explanation, or identifying a frequency for each major category.

Analysis

Data were summarized quantitatively by teachers' success status and grade level. Frequencies for each questionnaire category were calculated and mean frequencies computed for each success status by grade level. This resulted in data summaries that were compared by success status categories at both third and sixth grades. Mean frequencies were also computed for each questionnaire area of interest for all third and all sixth grade teachers in the sample, which allowed for a description of reading programs at each grade level.

Specification of frequencies for instructional procedures by success status at each grade level resulted in comparative data at three levels of teacher effectiveness. Data summaries at each grade level provided a point of comparison for success status levels within and between grade levels.

RESULTS

Frequencies for third and sixth grade teachers' use of a basal reader series were similar. Fifty-five percent of third grade teachers reported using a basal series in comparison with sixty-one percent of the sixth grade teachers. Success status differences were noted at both grade levels. Seventy-three percent of the third grade teachers reported the use of a basal reader series; forty-five percent of both average and low success status third-grade teachers reported using a basal series for reading instruction. At sixth grade a similar pattern was noted; seventy-five percent of high, sixty-four percent of average, and forty-four percent of low success status teachers reported basal series usage for their reading instruction.

The average number of reading groups by grade level and success status revealed some notable differences. Within grade levels, high success teachers reported fewer numbers of reading groups than did low success teachers. At third grade, high success teachers had an average of 2.4 reading groups and low success teachers averaged 5.0 reading groups. High success sixth grade teachers had an average of 2.1 reading groups compared to 3.3 reading groups reported for low success status sixth grade teachers. The range for the number of reading groups reported at each third grade success status level was: high one to five, average two to six, and low two to six. At sixth grade success status levels the reading groups ranged from one to three (high and average) and two to six (low).

Two categories of the questionnaire dealt with planning instruction

and diagnosing pupils' reading: use of skill sequence charts in instructional planning, and frequency of record keeping and use of teacher-prepared and basal level tests.

Sixty-four percent of both the high and average success third grade teachers reported the use of reading skill sequence charts in their instructional planning. Low success status third grade teachers indicated a 36 percent usage of sequence charts. Types of charts used by these third grade teachers were commercial (basal) and teacher prepared. All of the high success status teachers reported using only a commercial sequence chart, 86 percent of the average success status teachers used commercial sequence skill charts, and 50 percent of low effective teachers reported using commercial charts.

Sixth grade teachers reported less use of sequence skill charts than did third grade teachers, 29 percent compared to 55 percent. Less than 20 percent of high and low success status sixth grade teachers reported the use of skill sequence charts. Fifty percent of average success teachers used skill sequence charts.

Frequency of record keeping on pupils' reading and use of teacher-prepared tests and basal level tests varied little between third, and sixth grade teachers. At third grade, thirty-nine percent kept daily records, 52 percent reported keeping weekly records, and nine percent utilized a monthly interval. Sixth grade teachers reported 16 percent daily, 61 percent weekly and 23 percent monthly record keeping procedures. In comparing teachers by success status, the greatest difference for third grade was between high and average success status teachers, who reported 67 percent and 36 percent respectively for weekly record keeping. At the sixth grade level, 63 percent of high success status

teachers reported keeping weekly records compared to 71 percent of average and 44 percent of low success status teachers. The greatest difference at sixth grade was for monthly record keeping -- 44 percent of low success, 15 percent of average success, and 12 percent of high success status teachers were placed in this category.

Teachers' grouping of pupils for reading instruction was another major section of the questionnaire. Teachers' responses to items dealing with group flexibility, criteria used for changing group structure, and group skill instruction revealed some interesting differences. All of the third grade teachers reported using flexible grouping; however, 71 percent of the sixth grade teachers utilized flexible grouping. The greatest difference in the use of flexible grouping at the sixth grade was for average effective teachers who noted a 50 percent usage, compared to 100 percent of high success and 77 percent for low success teachers.

At third grade, 55 percent of the high effective teachers reported using pupil progress as the major criterion for placing a pupil in a different group contrasted with 27 percent of the low success teachers. Sixty-three percent of high success sixth grade teachers used pupil progress as a means for changing pupils' group placement, contrasted with 29 percent of low success teachers.

In addition to group flexibility, data on teachers' use of skill grouping and the reading instruction of such groups were gathered. Sixty-four percent of the third and 52 percent of the sixth grade teachers used skill grouping. Success status differences for teachers who did use skill grouping were as follows: high third grade 82 percent, average third grade 45 percent, low third grade 64 percent. Frequency differences for use of skill grouping by success status were also noted at sixth grade: 75 percent high, 43 percent average, and 44 percent low.

The focus of instruction for these skill groups varied between grade levels. Phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension were reported receiving emphasis by 36 percent or more of third grade teachers using skill grouping. Comprehension and vocabulary were emphasized by 36 percent or more of sixth grade teachers in their skill group instruction. Comprehension and vocabulary were also the instructional areas that varied the most within grade levels by success status categories. Of the high third grade teachers who used skill grouping, 66 percent used it for vocabulary instruction and 22 percent for comprehension instruction. One hundred percent of the high effective sixth grade teachers reported the teaching of comprehension and 83 percent reported the teaching of vocabulary in skill groups. At sixth grade for both average and low success status teachers, 50 percent of the teachers who grouped for skill instruction focused on vocabulary and comprehension.

DISCUSSION

The data supports many of the current research findings in teacher effectiveness and provides new insights into effective instructional procedures. Findings of the present study parallel closely recent teacher effectiveness research. Effective teachers at both third and sixth grade levels used fewer reading groups than did less effective teachers. This finding is consistent with other investigations and time on task studies (Rosenshine, 1979). Opportunity to learn (Guthrie, Martuza, Seifert, 1976) was reflected in teachers' reported use of sequence skill charts, which provided instructional development related to valued reading outcomes. More effective teachers relied upon commercial skill charts connected directly with the basal reader series, while less effective teachers

relied more heavily on teacher prepared sequence charts.

Another major variable associated with quality reading instruction is use of diagnosis (Heilman, Blair, Rupley, 1981). All teachers in the study kept records on pupils' reading, but more effective teachers reported more emphasis on basal reader diagnostic level tests and less effective teachers concentrated their efforts on teacher-made diagnostic instruments. Related to diagnostic record keeping, all teachers used flexible grouping procedures. However, a major discrepancy was found between effective and less effective teachers. Effective teachers used the criterion of progress to change pupils from one group to another. In contrast, less effective teachers used the criterion of lack of progress to change group membership.

The results regarding the use of the basal reader is related to the data reported for record keeping, sequence charts, and diagnostic tests. Effective teachers reported to have relied heavily upon basal readers while less effective teachers did not. Furthermore, nigh success teachers reported using fewer basal levels for instruction. This finding can be related to the importance of teacher-directed instruction; identifying instructional objectives, pacing instruction, monitoring pupils' performance, and maintaining pupils' engagement in the lessons are more likely to be efficiently accomplished with fewer reading groups. While some criticism has been cited in the literature on reliance upon the basal reader (Durkin, 1978-79), a crucial question seems to be how does one use the basal effectively. Apparently, the effective teachers in this study used the basal to the enhancement of learning.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The results depicting specific reading instructional practices according to success status are important because they provide descriptive data on the teaching reading. Implementation of this detailed data is essential in facilitating change in teachers' reading instructional practices. As stated previously, many of the current research results in teacher effectiveness have been studied over the past fifty years. In searching for reasons why such information has not had the impact it should have in our schools, the authors feel that little attention has been paid to teachers' perceptions of teacher effectiveness.

Teachers will not change their instruction in light of research findings if they perceive their own teaching as being congruent with pupils' success. Indeed, if teachers are to seriously consider new techniques or strategies, they must be shown actual data representing their instruction in comparison to student achievement gain. Thus, the data in this study could be presented to teachers as descriptive in nature and compared with current teacher effectiveness research results. This is a necessary step in the change process. Teachers must be shown that a gap exists between what actually is happening in classrooms and what research shows is productive for student learning.

While it is logical to assume that research results about effective teaching of reading could result in improving the quality of classroom reading instruction, it is argued that this will only happen if teachers can perceive a need to change. A necessary ingredient in changing teachers' perceptions is the availability and presentation of data representing actual instructional practices. The authors' believe

little attention has been given to teacher perceptions of teacher effectiveness, which is a credible explanation for why this information has had only a minimal impact in our schools.

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